



VOTING RIGHTS OF BULGARIAN MINORITIES: Case of Roma and of Bulgarian Turks with Dual Bulgarian-Turkish Citizenship

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IMIR

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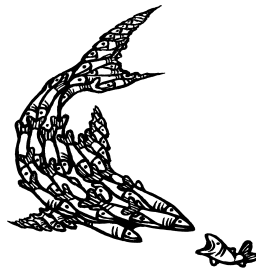
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VOTING RIGHTS OF BULGARIAN MINORITIES: Case of Roma and of Bulgarian Turks with Dual Bulgarian-Turkish Citizenship

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IMIR



**WP4 National Case Studies of Challenges to
Tolerance in Political Life**

**D 4.1 Final Country Reports on Concepts and
Practices of Tolerance Addressing Cultural Diversity
in Political Life**

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**ACCEPT PLURALISM Research Project,
Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion:
Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe**

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Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe (ACCEPT PLURALISM)

ACCEPT PLURALISM is a Research Project, funded by the European Commission under the Seventh Framework Program. The project investigates whether European societies have become more or less tolerant during the past 20 years. In particular, the project aims to clarify: (a) how is tolerance defined conceptually, (b) how it is codified in norms, institutional arrangements, public policies and social practices, (c) how tolerance can be measured (whose tolerance, who is tolerated, and what if degrees of tolerance vary with reference to different minority groups). The ACCEPT PLURALISM consortium conducts original empirical research on key issues in school life and in politics that thematise different understandings and practices of tolerance. Bringing together empirical and theoretical findings, ACCEPT PLURALISM generates a State of the Art Report on Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in Europe, a Handbook on Ideas of Tolerance and Cultural Diversity in Europe, a Tolerance Indicators' Toolkit where qualitative and quantitative indicators may be used to score each country's performance on tolerating cultural diversity, and several academic publications (books, journal articles) on Tolerance, Pluralism and Cultural Diversity in Europe. The ACCEPT PLURALISM consortium is formed by 18 partner institutions covering 15 EU countries. The project is hosted by the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and co-ordinated by Prof. Anna Triandafyllidou.

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IMIR is a private, non-political, non-profit and non-governmental organization, studying the relations and the interaction between different cultures, ethnoses and religions in Southeastern Europe in order to help the development, preservation and integration of all minority communities.

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Executive Summary

According to the 2011 census, the population of Bulgaria numbers 7,364,570 people. The two largest minorities in the country are Turks and Roma. Turks represent 8.8% of the population (588,318), while the share of Roma is 4.9% (325,343) according to the census. Experts believe that the real number of Roma could be twice as high.

The debate about the political participation of Bulgarian minorities and especially about their allegedly disproportionately strong influence on the election results is among the most disputed and polarising issues in Bulgaria. Populist and nationalist political actors have periodically raised demands to limit the voting rights of Bulgarian minorities. Their intentions were partially realised in 2001 with the passing of the new Election Code.

While introducing numerous positive changes and bringing some much needed clarity and order into the previously fragmented and confusing electoral legislation, the Code is highly controversial and has drawn criticism from international institutions, Bulgarian human rights watchdogs and other civic organisations, and some political actors. The most problematic issue is the six-months residency requirement for participation in local elections, which is an infringement on voting rights of numerous Bulgarian citizens. This restriction is aimed above all at the large community of people holding a dual Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship (estimated at up to 380,000).

The new Election Code also tries to prevent or discourage some of the most notorious illegal and illegitimate practices that regularly accompany the elections in Bulgaria. One such practice is the so-called vote buying – a process when people vote for a certain party or independent candidate in exchange for money or other type of bribe. Roma are most often accused that they sell their votes and in this way distort the election results. A 2009 survey has shown that 40% of Roma are prepared to vote for those who pay them. The measures are therefore disproportionally targeting the Roma community. The media reporting on alleged Roma vote selling also strongly contributes to the prevailingly negative public attitude towards Roma.

The key question the following report therefore tries to answer is how the populist and nationalistic political agenda on voting rights of Bulgarian minorities influences the relations between different ethnic communities in Bulgaria. The debate on voting rights is an excellent catalyst for evaluating the attitudes towards minorities – ranging from extremely intolerant demands for full revoking of existing political and voting rights to calls for genuine acceptance and respect of diversity.

The fieldwork was conducted between October 2011 and February 2012. It included both desk research and empirical fieldwork. The most important event that marked the period in which the fieldwork was conducted were the presidential and local elections, which took place in October 2011.

During the fieldwork, 14 semi-standardised interviews were taken. The interview guide was divided into two main groups of questions. The first one focused on the new Election Code and its restriction of the voting rights of people with double citizenship. This topic very directly concerns the political representation of the Bulgarian Turks. The second topic centred on the so-called vote buying – a notorious practice which seems to spread with each successive elections. The issue is connected with the voting of the Roma community, as Roma are most often believed to participate in such schemes.

The main part of the desk research consisted of collecting and analysing the media coverage of the main political challenge analysed in this report: the 2011 Election code and its consequences for the

voting rights of Bulgarian Turkish and Roma minorities. In addition, statistical data, legal texts, policy documents, and proceedings of the National Assembly and relevant parliamentary committees were also examined.

One of the main findings of our research is that the changes introduced by the new Election Code have tainted the pre-election process and the election campaign. They also intensified the inter-ethnic distrust and confrontation.

The research has shown that the declarative support for the democratic and tolerant arrangements where all Bulgarian citizens have equal political rights is quickly cast aside when it comes to the concrete cases concerning ethnic and religious otherness. The fact that Bulgarian Turks have been directly affected by the new Election Code has caused a barely concealed relief among the majority population, rather than an open indignation over the undemocratic arrangement. Such an attitude is an indication of a low level of tolerance towards the minorities and of immature civil consciousness of the society.

Three main discourses on the state of inter-ethnic relations in Bulgaria can be identified:

- 1) inter-ethnic relations are not on a downward curve, but follow a cyclical pattern – deterioration in the election period after which they return to normality;
- 2) inter-ethnic relations are steadily deteriorating, not just because of the political games and manipulation, but because of the economic crisis and worsening standard of living
- 3) not only inter-ethnic relations are worsening, but relations among all people in Bulgaria in general

The notorious practice of vote buying and selling is not confined to Roma, as the popular stereotypes would have us believe. The October 2011 elections have shown that this malicious practice is spreading. As a result, the majority of the Bulgarian voters are becoming increasingly disillusioned and disappointed over the state of the Bulgarian political system and prefer not to vote at all, which is playing straight into the hands of the corrupt and dishonest economic-political actors. Despite that, the media and the public perceptions continue to attribute this malpractice to Roma, who are therefore accused that they influence the election results in an illegal and illegitimate way.

The current research has again highlighted the significant discrepancy between the official political and public discourse on perception and application of democratic norms and values, and the reality. While the public speech is focused on notions of tolerance and acceptance, the concrete examples and everyday practices testify about entrenched intolerance that can be easily mobilised in the critical moments like political, social and economic crisis.

Despite the fact that the central government periodically comes up with different programmes and strategies for integration of minorities, the practical implementation is either lacking or is flawed and inadequate. The research has shown that the regional solutions tailored to the ethnic, cultural and religious structure of the population on the local level can be far more successful than the solutions proposed on the national level. The largest problem is to find a way to transfer the functioning everyday tolerance from the local level into the national context, which continues to be dominated by intolerant stereotypes and prejudices. A larger regional and municipal autonomy to address the needs and problems of the local population according to its specific features would be a positive step in turning the unsuccessful top-down approach into a more appropriate two-way process.

The research has also established that many people are either ignorant of or tend to disregard the numerous problems that could provoke or intensify tensions between different ethnic, cultural and religious groups. Forming and changing the collective matrix is a long and contradictory process. Our recommendation is to intensify the research of inter-ethnic relations – not just in Bulgarian context, but also in the European one. The disclosure of good practices and popularisation of results from

similar studies increase the sensitivity of the society for such topics. They also stimulate the willingness of state institutions to look for and implement more adequate and comprehensive policies.

Keywords

Political participation of minorities; Bulgarians; Turks; Roma; Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens; vote buying; Election Code; populism and nationalism; voting rights; Movement for Rights and Freedoms; intolerance, tolerance, recognition and respect.

1. Introduction

According to the 2011 census, the population of Bulgaria numbers 7,364,570 people. The two largest minorities in the country are Turks and Roma. Turks represent 8.8% of the population (588,318), while the share of Roma is 4.9% (325,343) according to the census. Experts believe that the real number of Roma could be twice as high.

The debate about the political participation of Bulgarian minorities and especially about their allegedly disproportionately strong influence on the election results is among the most disputed and polarising issues in Bulgaria. In the pre-election periods, the debate usually becomes exceptionally hot, and quite frequently, populist and nationalist political actors raise demands aimed at limiting the voting rights of Bulgarian minorities. Needless to say, these demands are more often than not openly undemocratic, illiberal and intolerant.

Against such social-political background, on 19 January 2011 the National Assembly of Bulgaria adopted the new Election Code. While introducing numerous positive changes and bringing some much needed clarity and order into previously fragmented and confusing electoral legislation, the Code is highly controversial and some of its articles have drawn criticism from international institutions, Bulgarian human rights watchdogs and other civic organisations, and some political actors.

The 2011 Election Code is the first ever unified legislation act dealing with elections in Bulgaria. It substituted four different acts, which previously regulated different types of elections (Act on the Election of Members of Parliament, Act on the Election of President and Vice President, Act on the Election of Members of the European Parliament, and Local Elections Act). The first draft of the Election Code was vetoed by President Georgi Parvanov and returned to Parliament for reconsideration of its numerous articles. The most important complaints voiced by President Parvanov and supported by some opposition political parties and a part of the civil society included: the 12-months residency requirement for participation in local elections; limitations on voting rights of citizens with dual citizenship; abolition of the direct election of district mayors; increased population threshold for the election of mayors of villages; and reduction of the number of municipal councillors.

The presidential veto was eventually overridden by the majority in the National Assembly (more than half of all MPs need to vote for the law to override the President's veto). As none of the demanded changes were made to the Code, the opposition parties approached the Constitutional Court. In its Decision no. 4/2011 from 4 May 2011, the Court ruled that several provisions of the Election Code were unconstitutional. Following the ruling, the National Assembly on 2 June adopted a series of amendments to the Code. Most notably, the requirement to live at least 12 months prior to the election day in a certain Bulgarian municipality to be eligible to vote in the local elections there was shortened to six months (four months for the October 2011 elections).

The attempts to limit the voting rights of entire groups of Bulgarian citizens did not alarm only the minority communities and the political parties, which represent their interests, but also the Bulgarian civil society and the international (especially EU) institutions. Although the nationalistic and xenophobic public dispositions, exploited by various political parties, have been on the rise across Europe over the recent years, the developments in Bulgaria are characterised by several features that make them rather unique in the European space.

One aspect that makes Bulgaria exceptional is the large community of people holding a dual Bulgarian and Turkish citizenship. It is estimated that up to 380,000 people are at the same time citizens of one EU member and one non-member state. Another feature distinguishing Bulgaria from the majority of other EU countries is the sizeable Roma minority – according to expert estimates representing about 7-8% of the population.

Not surprisingly, even the most nationalistic and xenophobic political actors try to conceal their attempts to curtail the political participation of minorities by presenting them as measures aimed at fighting certain illegal and illegitimate practices that regularly accompany the elections in Bulgaria. One such practice is the so-called vote buying – a process when people vote for a certain party or independent candidate in exchange for money or other type of bribe. Roma are most often accused that they sell their votes and in this way they distort the election results by giving advantage to the most corrupt and unscrupulous political actors.

Despite the consensus among all political parties that vote buying and similar schemes are unacceptable and that the legislation and practical organisation of election process need to change in a way that would limit or prevent them, the practice shows that virtually no party is immune to such temptation and the phenomenon has been growing from year to year and from elections to elections. Although the investigations conducted by civil society and independent observers show that the vote buying is not limited to the Roma community only, nor that the majority of Roma are ready and willing to sell their votes, the nationalistic parties have managed to force their agenda into the media and public debates. Both are saturated with extreme positions regarding the voting rights of Roma citizens and their ability to take an informed decision on the elections.

Another contentious issue is the voting of Bulgarian Turks, who have emigrated to the Republic of Turkey and have a dual (Bulgarian and Turkish) citizenship. There is a strong position, shared by numerous political actors and a large part of the society, that despite being Bulgarian citizens, they should have no right to influence the Bulgarian politics because they do not live in the country. Periodically, various political parties have proposed and tried to implement different measures to limit their voting rights. Although the issue of voting rights of emigrants does not concern only the Bulgarian Turks, but also ethnic Bulgarians who have left the country since 1989, the debates focus on the Bulgarian emigrants of Turkish origin because the practice has shown that they are considerably more active and organised voters than the ethnic Bulgarians in emigration. The results from the last few elections show that between 50 and 60% of the votes cast abroad are for the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), a political party representing the interests of Bulgarian Turks and other minority communities. The attempts to limit the voting rights of Bulgarian dual citizens therefore have a very practical goal – to decrease the electoral success of the MRF, widely perceived by other political actors and a significant share of the society as wielding a disproportionately large political and economic power in the country.

The key question:

The key question the following report tries to answer is how the populist and nationalistic political agenda on voting rights of Bulgarian minorities influences the relations between different ethnic communities in Bulgaria. The debate on voting rights can be an excellent catalyst for evaluating the

attitudes towards minorities – ranging from extremely intolerant demands for full revoking of existing political and voting rights to calls for genuine acceptance and respect of diversity.

2. Methodology

The fieldwork was conducted between October 2011 and February 2012. It included both desk research and empirical fieldwork. The most important event that marked the period in which the fieldwork was conducted were the presidential and local elections, which took place on 23 October (the first round) and 30 October 2011 (the second round).

During the fieldwork, 14 semi-standardised interviews were taken. The sample of respondents included representatives of all major ethnic and religious groups in Bulgaria – Orthodox Christian Bulgarians (7), Turks (4), Muslim Bulgarians (2) and Roma (1). In order to capture a wide range of different views and opinions, we interviewed several politicians (two members of the National Assembly of Bulgaria and six who hold or used to hold positions in local government). One respondent is a well-known political analyst and an expert on the topic of political participation of minorities. Five respondents are ordinary citizens with different professions and background.

The elections had a decisive impact on the way the interviews were conducted. On the one hand, the overwhelming share of public debates and media coverage in the period from September to November dealt with the elections and political developments in Bulgaria, making our research topic about the voting rights of minorities highly relevant. All respondents were excited over the elections and eager to share their opinion. On the other hand, some of them (especially the local politicians who were personally involved in the election race) were emotionally affected by the elections and their outcome. It was very difficult for them to distance themselves from their personal experience and to concentrate on evaluating the issues in the national frame.

Four people were interviewed in the capital Sofia. Three interviews were taken in two villages in central Bulgaria. Both villages have sizable Roma communities. Four interviews were made in an eastern Bulgarian town with the majority Turkish population – two respondents were ethnic Bulgarians and two were ethnic Turks. The remaining three interviews are from a village in south-western Bulgaria, where the majority of residents are Muslim Bulgarians. Our sample thus roughly corresponds to the ethnic structure of the Bulgarian population. Inclusion of small settlements from various parts of the country is particularly important for the research, because the problems, relations, tendencies and perceptions there often significantly differ from those that can be noted in Sofia.

The interview guide (see Annex 1) was divided into two main groups of questions. The first one focused on the new Election Code and its restriction of the voting rights of people with double citizenship. This topic very directly concerns the political representation of the Bulgarian Turks, as it is quite obvious that restrictions are aimed in the first place against people holding a dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizenship. This issue also brings forward the question of how willing are Bulgarians to accept and respect the right to vote of those Bulgarian citizens who live outside the country – especially if they are of a minority origin.

The second topic centred on the so-called vote buying – a notorious practice which seems to spread with each successive elections. The issue is connected with the voting of the Roma community, as Roma are most often believed to participate in such schemes. This group of questions examined the attitude of the society towards participation of Roma in the political and social processes in Bulgaria.

All interviews were transcribed in Bulgarian. The audio files are stored in IMIR's archive. Anonymity of all respondents is guaranteed. They were given assurances that their opinions will be used only for

the purpose of this research. The interviews were analysed with the method of discourse analysis, which considers the selection of strategies for providing answers, the way opinions are formulated, and the influence of the environment and circumstances in which the interview took place. The analysis is structured in a way that makes it possible to evaluate the levels of intolerance, tolerance and recognition.

The main part of the desk research consisted of collecting and analysing the media coverage of the main political challenge analysed in this report: the 2011 Election code and its consequences for the voting rights of Bulgarian Turkish and Roma minorities. In addition, statistical data, legal texts, policy documents, and proceedings of the National Assembly and relevant parliamentary committees were also examined.

For the media coverage, we have focused on *Trud* (or Labour; in Bulgarian Труд). *Trud* is the largest-circulation Bulgarian daily newspaper (between 70,000 and 100,000). Established in 1936, it is also the oldest Bulgarian newspaper still in existence. According to public opinion poll, it is the most trusted daily newspaper. Its language and positions are predominantly conservative. It is considered politically neutral and usually critical of the government regardless of its colour. Using the “keyword” search through the *Trud* archive, we compiled three groups of articles around the following keywords: election tourism, vote buying and election code.

The time period for articles on vote buying was October-November 2011 (roughly a month before and after the 2011 presidential and local elections). A month before the elections was the most active period for this illegal practice, while the month after the elections was marked by a number of police investigations and court proceedings against vote buyers and sellers. We opted for a longer period (January- November 2011) for articles on election tourism. Because of the new Election Code, which introduced the six-month residency requirement, the massive voter shifts did not occur few days before the elections (as was the case on previous elections). Instead, a new phenomenon was detected – large groups of voters changing their address registrations en masse during the first half of the 2011.

Leaving out the articles shorter than 200 words, we analysed 21 articles on election tourism and 31 articles on vote buying. Articles were coded and grouped according to the central topics they dealt with. The Critical Discourse Analysis was then used to reveal how the expressed opinions, implied meanings and used language are positioned within the frame “intolerance – tolerance – respect and recognition” regarding the voting rights of the Bulgarian minorities.

3. Analysis of the political challenge: Voting of people holding a dual citizenship

3.1. Background information

3.1.1. Historical background

Turkish ethnic community is a traditional minority. Its roots go back to the period of the Ottoman rule over Bulgaria (1396-1878). After the establishment of the modern Bulgarian state in 1878, the status of Turks drastically changed – from the ruling elite to a minority in a state dominated by people of different ethnicity and religion. For over a century (until 1989), their position in the society and the attitude of the state and the majority population towards them were characterised by remarkable inconsistency. The periods of relative tolerance were followed by extreme repression and assimilation attempts. Even today, the majority of Turks live somewhat separated from the majority population – in compact areas in less developed rural regions. Despite that, their aspiration to participate in all aspects of social life has remained strong through the years. Hence, in addition to its cultural and intellectual

elite, the Turkish community formed also its political elite immediately after the end of the socialist period in 1989.

Turks are a well-organised community, with high levels of inter-group support. The Muslim religion, different cultural traditions and ethnic origin are their main identity markers, which they have upheld and protected with consistency both during the periods of tolerance and repression (in the authoritarian past). For numerous Bulgarians, Turks are representatives of an alien ethnos that was hostile to Bulgarians in the past. At the same time, their participation in the cultural, social and political life in the country shows that Turks are dedicated and active citizens. The latent suspicions that they might harbour loyalty to another state (Turkey) often clash with the traditional stereotypes that Turks are hardworking, honest and overall – “non-problematic.” Bulgarians in general appreciate the efforts of Turks to be fully integrated in the society, and acknowledge that in most respects, there are hardly any differences in the way Turks and Bulgarians live.

During the communist rule (1945-1989), the repressive state policies aimed at forced assimilation resulted in several waves of mass emigration of Bulgarian Turks to Turkey (1950-1951; 1968; 1989). After 1989, a large number of emigrants were able to regain the Bulgarian citizenship they have previously lost, and thus they became dual (Bulgarian and Turkish) citizens. This has eased their contacts with the relatives in Bulgaria, made it easier to visit their former homes more often and opened possibilities for starting a business in Bulgaria. In addition, the Bulgarian citizenship also enabled their participation in the political events in Bulgaria – giving them the right to vote.

Among the numerous political parties formed after 1989 was also the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF) – a party mainly concerned with the protection of rights and interests of Muslims in Bulgaria. Turks and a significant share of Muslim Bulgarians recognised the MRF as their political representative on the national level. Over the years, the party became an important factor in the Bulgarian politics and participated in or provided a decisive support for several governments. The party has an exceptionally consolidated and organised structure and its activists and offices maintain close ties with the electorate not just in Bulgaria, but also in a number of cities in Turkey, where larger communities of immigrants from Bulgaria reside. Highly cohesive and active electorate means that the MRF can count on a very stable result on all elections – a sharp difference from almost all other political parties in Bulgaria, which have experienced notable shifts in their results in each consecutive election cycle. Although the MRF has never participated in the presidential elections with its own candidate, its support for a given candidate is traditionally decisive for winning the elections.¹

3. 1. 2. Legal and political context

The Bulgarian citizens holding also a citizenship of another country face no restrictions related to their residency on the parliamentary and presidential elections. The situation is different regarding the local elections and elections for the European Parliament. The Article 3 (2) of the Election Code states that those Bulgarian citizens, who have lived at least three months prior to the election day in Bulgaria or in another EU member state, are eligible to cast their vote for the members of the European Parliament. The right to vote on the local elections is defined by the Article 3 (4) – only those Bulgarian citizens who have lived at least six months prior to the election day in a certain Bulgarian municipality have the right to vote for the mayor and municipal council of that municipality.

¹ The recent presidential elections (October 2011) were a prominent exception, as the MRF supported the candidate of the Bulgarian Socialist Party Ivaylo Kalfin against the winner Rosen Plevneliev of GERB. Although the majority of ethnic Turks supported Kalfin (according to the Institute of Social Surveys and Marketing, the exit polls showed that 71% of Turkish voters voted for Kalfin against 29% for Plevneliev), it seems that many preferred to stay at home and not vote at all. Cvetan Cvetanov, Minister of Interior and the head of GERB's election campaign team, stated after the first results were published, that “for the first time, a President was elected without the broker MRF” (Novinar, 2010).

Exceptionally, as the Code was passed in the election year, the residency requirement for the 2011 municipal elections was reduced from 6 to 4 months.

Practically all debates on the issue of voting rights of dual citizens focus on the case of Bulgarian Turks with the dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizenship. On the one hand, there is a historical distrust towards the former imperial hegemon and the Bulgarian Turkish emigrants are often perceived as a potential fifth column of the Turkish Republic. On the other hand, the Bulgarian-Turkish voters have over the past 20 years overwhelmingly supported the Movement for Rights and Freedoms – a fact upsetting not only the MRF's political rivals, but a significant share of (ethnic Bulgarian) society.

On the June 2001 parliamentary elections, out of 50,000 votes cast in Turkey, the MRF received 38,840 votes (Özgür-Baklacioglu, 2006, p. 328). On the 2005 general elections, 53.99% of all who have voted abroad (77,020) supported the MRF (the party received 12.81% on the national scale). On the 2009 elections, when the number of voters abroad was more than double compared to 2005, the result was even more astonishing: the MRF collected 61.18% of votes abroad, while altogether its result on the national scale was 14.45%. From another point of view, from 610,521 votes the MRF received in 2009, 93,926 came from the voting sections abroad (see CEC, 2005; CEC, 2009). The number of Turkish-speaking Bulgarian citizens living in Turkey is estimated to be around 1,175,000. Different authors give different figures about the number of people with dual Bulgarian-Turkish citizenship. The highest estimate is around 380,000 people (Özgür-Baklacioglu, 2006, p. 322; Smilov and Jileva, 2010, p. 19). In any case, this is a group that has a considerable electoral potential (the number of voters registered for the October 2011 local elections was around 6,518,000; see OSCE/ODIHR, 2011a, p. 4).

3. 1. 3. Attempts to limit the voting rights of Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens

In the 1990s, the question about the voting rights of Bulgarian Turks with dual citizenship was not problematic. This was partially a result of the desire to accommodate the Turkish minority and “make up” for the repressive assimilation policies of the communist regime. In the second half of the decade, Bulgaria also went through a deep political and economic crisis (1996-1997), which sidelined the question about the political participation of Bulgarian Turks.

In the first decade of the 2000s, the left-right bipolar model of the 1990s was shattered by the rise of the populist parties, such as the National Movement Simeon II in 2001, GERB – Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria in 2006, and also the extreme nationalist party Attack in 2005. In this situation, the voting rights of Bulgarian citizens residing in Turkey came under fire. In December 2006, the party Attack proposed amendments to the Law on Bulgarian Citizenship. Amendments would eliminate the dual citizenship, with the exception of citizens of Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine, who are of ethnic Bulgarian origin and who would have the right to obtain Bulgarian citizenship “to protect their rights and economic interest” (see Siderov, 2006). The amendments were rejected by the Parliament (19 votes ‘for,’ 78 ‘against,’ 26 abstentions) (News.bg, 2007).²

² Attack has again sent a bill with their amendments into the parliamentary procedure in July 2011. Before the reading in the National Assembly, the bill needs to be reviewed and discussed by the relevant parliamentary committees – in this case the Legal Affairs Committee and the Human Rights, Religion, Citizens' Complaints and Petitions Committee. The Legal Affairs Committee examined the bill in September 2011. Of 26 members of the Committee, 2 voted to support the amendments, 3 were against, while 15 abstained. The Committee therefore recommended the National Assembly not to support the bill on the first reading (Legal Affairs Committee, 2011). Large number of abstentions, however, most likely means that the majority of committee members did not want to openly support such a discriminatory bill, but were personally inclined to agree with Attack's argumentation.

In January 2012, the bill was discussed also by the Parliamentary Human Rights, Religion, Citizens' Complaints and Petitions Committee. Attack's deputy chairman Pavel Shopov underlined that the holders of dual citizenship have only rights but no obligations towards the Bulgarian state and that in this way, they are in a privileged position compared to

The demands to limit the voting rights of Turkish-Bulgarian dual citizens intensified prior to the first elections for the European Parliament in Bulgaria in May 2007. The opposition parties demanded the introduction of residence requirements that would disqualify voters residing in non-EU countries (especially Turkey). The proposal had also an overwhelming public support according to the public opinion poll conducted by the Alpha Research Agency. 65% of respondents supported the introduction of residence requirements for the EP elections. 70% of respondents were in favour of introduction of such requirement for all elections, while only 24.8% believed that such measures were discriminatory (Alpha Research, 2007). During the heated parliamentary debate on 8 February 2007, the opposition raised the argument that MEPs elected by the voters residing in Turkey would represent Turkey rather than Bulgaria in the EP. After the proposal was rejected by the majority, Ivan Kostov (leader of Democrats for Strong Bulgaria) called all deputies who did not support “this shameful trade-off” to walk out. Following his address, all deputies from opposition parties (Union of Democratic Forces, Democrats for Strong Bulgaria, Attack and Bulgarian National Union) left the plenary hall (National Assembly, 2007). The ruling coalition (Bulgarian Socialist Party, National Movement Simeon II, Movement for Rights and Freedoms) ultimately passed the legislation, which gave all Bulgarian citizens the right to vote regardless of where they live.

In 2009, when two elections were held (in June for the European Parliament and in July for the National Assembly³), the populist and nationalist parties strengthened their resolve to find a way to prevent the Bulgarian citizens of Turkish origin residing abroad from participation on the elections. The convincing victory of the populist-conservative GERB party in 2009 elections and their comfortable parliamentary majority provided by the support of the Attack led to the inevitable: the Election Code passed in January 2011 and amended in June introduced the six months residency requirement for the local elections.

3. 1. 4. “Election tourism” and the Movement for Rights and Freedoms

The mechanism through which the MRF is able to secure a relatively stable and predictable number of votes on all elections is popularly known as “election tourism.” Large groups of voters residing in Turkey are organised and transported to their native towns and villages in Bulgaria to cast their votes. Thus, they often directly determine the outcome of the elections – especially in smaller towns and villages, where literally every vote counts and can decide who is elected as a village or municipal mayor, or a municipal councillor.

The unique position of the MRF – its unchallenged authority in numerous Bulgarian municipalities with the majority Muslim population – has in time increased its exposure to corrupt schemes and practices, and the party is today widely perceived (especially by its political opponents, media and political analysts) as the most corrupt political party in the country.⁴ Another development provoking

(Contd.)

other Bulgarian citizens. Speaking very explicitly about the Bulgarian-Turkish dual citizens, Shopov described them as “a huge mass of people who are not Europeans, do not accept European values, do not live according to the EU rules and actually reside on another continent.” Hundreds of thousands of such people use Bulgaria as a Trojan horse to have access to the EU, according to Shopov. Several members of the Committee objected to his remarks. The bill with amendments was flatly rejected (9 votes against, 2 abstentions, none for) (Human Rights, Religion, Citizens’ Complaints and Petitions Committee, 2012).

³ As mentioned above, the MRF collected 61.18% of votes from abroad on the national elections.

⁴ According to a public opinion research from 2008, 41.4% of respondents believe that “MPs, ministers and other MRF representatives in central and local government are very corrupt,” the same share (41.4%) neither agrees nor disagrees with such statement, while 17.2% disagree (Dimitrova, 2008). A political analyst Ognyan Minchev describes the MRF as “centralized, monopolistic ethnic corporation, which conducts slow, persistent and aggressive strategy for isolating ethnically mixed regions in Bulgaria under its hegemony and control.” In his view, “the massive political corruption (...) of the leaders and the activists of the MRF is unapproachable, solidly entrenched behind the monopolistic control, far from public scrutiny on the mechanisms of governance” (Minchev, 2005). In a recent interview, Prime Minister Boyko

negative dispositions towards the MRF is the ever growing political and economic influence of its perpetual leader Ahmed Dogan, who has headed the party since its establishment in 1990.⁵

In recent years, the resentment over the MRF among the majority population has spilled over into a negative attitude towards Turks in general. The discontent over the MRF thus interacted with the traditional stereotypes and prejudices against Turks, resulting in the growing intolerance towards this minority.

The solid grip of the MRF over its electorate is also a consequence of the fact that most other political parties largely neglect the Turkish minority. They rarely conduct election campaigns in regions populated by Muslims, do not try to win their support and rarely address issues, which are of main concern of these communities. Most parties view the “minority regions” as “bastions of the MRF” and prefer to concentrate their resources and attention elsewhere. Instead of finding ways to attract the potential MRF voters, other parties prefer to look for ways to administratively limit the influence of the MRF. The restriction of the right to vote on the local elections only to the people who have permanently resided in a given municipality for at least six months prior to the election day is the latest and bluntest such attempt.

3. 2. *The media analysis*

The daily *Trud* featured 21 articles mentioning election tourism in January-November 2011 period. Six articles (all from the February-May period) were devoted to the new Election Code and specifically its possible consequences for the election tourism. As this was the period between the passing of the first version of the Code (with 12 month residency requirement) and the ruling of the Constitutional Court, after which the Code was amended and the requirement for permanent address in a given municipality shortened to six months, most articles discussed pros and cons of longer and shorter residency requirement. Articles underlined that the 12-month requirement was unusual for the EU countries and was even in violation of various international agreements Bulgaria has signed.

Four articles (from October and November) analysed the elections and performance of the political parties. In general, the articles were very critical of the elections and stressed that the October 2011 elections were the most poorly organised and implemented elections since 1989. A large share of the blame was assigned to the Election Code, which has created a legal chaos. Analysing the performance of the political parties, articles noted the poorer performance of the Movement for Rights and Freedoms (compared to the previous elections). Although the obstacles and limitations to electoral tourism (especially the fact that it was no longer possible to bring buses of voters from Turkey on or prior to the election day) were listed among the reasons for the lower result, other factors were named as more important. They included internal frictions in the party, resulting in the appearance of several splinter groups; a sharp decline in the popularity of nationalistic Attack party, which previously acted as a threat mobilising the minority voters; and the fact that the MRF is not anymore a convenient “shortcut” to the state financing it used to be when it was a part of the governing coalition in the 2001-2009 period. The restrictions introduced by the Code were therefore evaluated as largely irrelevant for the MRF’s result and were instead criticised for preventing numerous eligible voters to exercise their right to vote due to confusion they have created.

Half of the articles on election tourism reported on actual cases of false address registrations, investigated by the police and judiciary. A number of municipal officials (including mayors) were

(Contd.)

Borisov referred to the MRF as “the conductor of corruption in Bulgaria” (Novinar, 2011). For links between the MRF and corruption, see also Koritarov, 2008.

⁵ Ahead of 2009 general elections, Dogan has described himself as “the instrument of power, who distributes the bits of financing in the state.” He added that the power was concentrated in him, and not in the MRF’s deputies in the Parliament (Sofia Echo, 2009).

investigated and in some cases arrested for administratively “increasing” the number of eligible voters in their municipality, town or village by issuing false address registrations to groups of people. In one of the more notorious cases, a town of Madzharovo with 1500 residents acquired 140 new residents just a few days before the expiry of the deadline for election residency requirement. Practically all articles on unlawful address registrations tendentiously mentioned that the “new residents” either had “predominantly Turkish names” or that they actually resided in the “nearby Roma neighbourhood.”

Despite the conscious attempt of the *Trud* editorial board not to cross the boundaries of political correctness and intolerant speech, the commentaries and especially the questions asked in various interviews implicitly brought forth the stereotypes and intolerant predispositions towards the minorities. This was most evident in the question whether the residency requirement would finally put an end to the buses bringing voters from Turkey to cast their ballots in various Bulgarian towns and villages. In general, in the majority of articles where the issue of election tourism was discussed in principle, the practice was almost exclusively linked to the MRF. Those articles which reported on the concrete cases of election tourism and false address registrations of voters, however clearly showed that this practice was employed by politicians from almost all political parties.

3. 3. *Fieldwork analysis – views of the respondents*

3. 3. 1. Attitudes towards political participation of the Turkish minority

The changes to the Election Code, which in practice limit the voting rights of numerous Bulgarian citizens, bring forward two problematic issues. The first is the fact that the new Code limits or revokes the hitherto existing rights. The second one is the predominantly intolerant position of the majority population regarding the right of the Turkish minority to participate in the political processes in Bulgaria.

When speaking about the voting rights of citizens in general, practically all respondents defend the opinion that these rights should not be restricted in any way. The new Election Code and especially the obligation to reside in the given municipality for at least six months to be eligible for voting on the local elections is seen as problematic. It seems that most respondents regardless of their ethnic and religious origin support the view of Remzi Osman (deputy-chief of the parliamentary group of the MRF) that according to the Constitution, all Bulgarian citizens have equal rights and obligations regardless of where they live. The conditioning of their voting rights with their permanent residence would therefore be unconstitutional and undemocratic (Apostolova, 2010).

“There is a problem with democracy here. Citizens of one country should not be prevented from voting. Voting right should not depend on whether the person lived for a certain period of time in the country or not.” – A-WP4-4

However, this tolerant and liberal discourse prevails only as long as the discussion remains generalised and the minorities are not specifically mentioned. The general defence of civic rights can quickly turn into something completely different when the question is narrowed down to the rights of the Bulgarian Turks.

“It is a bit different with Turks. First, many of them left Bulgaria during the Revival Process⁶ and perhaps there is some revanchism involved on their side. I suspect that the reason for the enormous support for the MRF is exactly this. They think that by voting for their own people they get some kind of payback, but I’m not 100% certain that this is so.” – A-WP4-4

⁶ The process of forced assimilation of Bulgarian Muslim minorities undertaken by the Bulgarian communist regime. The Bulgarian Muslims were forced to change their names, and their language, religion and traditions were prohibited.

The traditional suspicions towards the Bulgarian Turks are strengthened by the resentment over the perception that for the larger part of the post-socialist period, the MRF has played a disproportionately significant role in the Bulgarian political life owing to the votes coming from Turkey. Ethnic Bulgarian respondents are therefore quick to draw limits to their tolerant understanding that all Bulgarian citizens are entitled to the same rights. Many see the mass participation of voters from Turkey as something intolerable.

The Turkish respondents are somewhat surprisingly divided on the issue. The two members of the National Assembly are very critical of the Election Code and have little doubt that restrictions are targeting above all the voters residing in Turkey:

“In my opinion, some things were introduced on purpose to prevent certain minorities, and mainly their representatives who live across the border, from freely exercising their right to vote.” – A-WP4-3

On the other hand, Turkish respondents from a municipality where Turks represent the majority population and who have been directly affected by the practice of “election tourism” display opinions, which are quite close to the discourse of ethnic Bulgarians. The obvious influence (often so strong to play a decisive role) of the “travelling voters” on the local elections is causing discomfort and even annoyance among many Turks residing in Bulgaria.

“This what they did with the travelling (of voters from Turkey) was not good. You cannot just come here and change everything. To live in another country and then suddenly to decide who you want (to be elected here). And then he goes back, but we stay here. In a small municipality, this makes the difference. They change the vote, everything.” – A-WP4-11

“There are people among them I talked to, who are interested in what is happening in Bulgaria. I would accept that they vote for the president, but not on the local elections. They don’t pay taxes. They are not interested in this. If in a large city like Sofia three buses arrive, it will not even be noticed. But in a small village, three voters can turn the elections around.” – A-WP4-10

It is interesting to note that the ethnic Bulgarian respondents from the same municipality express a more cautious opinion. They feel it is less damaging to tolerate the continuation of election tourism than to discriminate against different voters and restrict their rights.

“On the one hand, I like this (the changes in the new Code), on the other hand I don’t. I like it because for many years, we have to live with the consequences of election tourism. On the other hand, in this way we deprive from voting also people, who are concerned about the development of the country, but are now unable to cast their votes.” – A-WP4-9

The way such opinions are formulated and communicated implicitly indicates that a certain measure of auto-censorship is present. The ethnic Bulgarians who live in regions where they are an actual local minority often tend to express themselves in a more cautious way. Their aspiration to be politically correct and to avoid confrontations reveals that they are, or feel that they are, in a subordinated position – especially in terms of professional development and political participation. Only towards the end of the interview, or in informal talk after the interview, they openly state their grievances that the state and the main political parties are not interested in the problems of Bulgarians living in regions where the ethnic Turks are a majority. Most often, their complaints refer to employment problems and difficulties in communication with the municipal institutions, which are as a rule dominated by the MRF.

In general, respondents try to provide a balanced comment on the restrictions imposed by the new Election Code. They acknowledge that all Bulgarian citizens have equal political rights, which should be respected without any hindrance. At the same time, they experience a certain sense of relief over the fact that people living abroad will have a lesser influence on the political developments in their municipalities. Such a dual attitude is an indication of a low level of tolerance towards the minorities and of the immature civil consciousness of the society. The declarative support for the democratic and

tolerant arrangements is quickly cast aside when it comes to the concrete cases concerning ethnic and religious otherness. In our case study, this is manifested in support for the restriction of the voting rights. The fact that Bulgarian Turks have been directly affected by the new Election Code has caused a barely concealed relief among the majority population, rather than an open indignation.

3. 3. 2. Elections and their influence of the inter-ethnic relations

Somewhat paradoxically, the changes introduced by the new Election Code have tainted the pre-election process and the election campaign. They also intensified the inter-ethnic distrust and confrontation. The MRF party, faced with the risk of losing a significant number of its voters, started to look for alternative ways to preserve its positions in the regions under its “control.” Our respondents from these regions, including the ethnic Turks not affiliated with the MRF, said that they have noticed a substantial intensification of different schemes for manipulation of the election results. According to their testimonies, the illegal practice of vote buying has risen to unprecedented levels, as did the pressure on people to vote for certain candidates.

In some cases, the pressure was exercised through clientelist networks, while in others it bordered on blunt extortion as people were given “hints” that there would be repercussions (employment problems, administrative obstacles, social isolation) if they voted for the “wrong” candidate. It has to be noted that in small villages, it is practically impossible to protect the secrecy of the ballot.

Two Turkish respondents described concrete practices and mechanisms of election manipulations:

“The politics (political parties) brings in the money. They give the money (in the proper places) and this changes everything, it changes people. One party decides everything, just like it was during the communism. If you don’t vote, there is no work for you, no nothing. Whether you want it or not – out of fear, you know, people would do anything.” – A-WP4-11

“I owe the local shop-keeper 400 leva (200 EUR), but I’m an influential person in my village. People take my opinion into consideration. So they (the people working for the party) pay my debt and I start talking to my neighbours. I don’t force them – they trust my opinion and at some point, it turns out that I changed their way of thinking, because my debt was paid.” – A-WP4-10

The two MPs add another, more conceptual dimension to the explanation why it is possible to manipulate and control the votes in the minority populated regions:

“The vote is controlled through a complete fusion of political and administrative positions. When you add the economic pressure, then (the situation) really moves far away from the free choice.” – A-WP4-3

“(In these) regions there is no trust in the state, in the institutions.” – A-WP4-2

The trust in the state institutions and the political system is in Bulgaria exceptionally low in general.⁷ In the regions where the MRF has been unchallenged and unchangeable political and economic hegemon, the trust in the institutions and the belief that anything can change are even lower. In such conditions, the anxiety and insecurity within the Turkish community can be and indeed were notably exploited during the last elections. According to some respondents, the MRF party was intentionally fuelling the fears and anxieties:

“I thought that we have left the Revival Process in the past, but in fact it is artificially maintained. I don’t think that these things (fear that Revival Process could be repeated) are passed down in the families. I believe other factors are involved, which abuse (this issue) at the moment.” – A-WP4-9

⁷ According to Eurobarometer 71 - Spring 2009, only 17% of Bulgarians trust their government, 10% trust the Bulgarian Parliament, and 14% trust the national judiciary (See European Commission, 2009, p. 20).

“What caught my attention was that right ahead of the elections, the MRF’s youth organisation was distributing books containing testimonies about the Revival Process.” – A-WP4-8

“21st century, we are members of the EU and NATO, and they talk about changing of the names and demolition of mosques.” – A-WP4-2

“This is the easiest way – to scare and manipulate people this way.” – A-WP4-3

“And at some point they started with this: ‘Don’t you know what they will do? They will crush us. They will close our mosques.’ And an ordinary man believes that this could really happen, and he goes and votes.” – A-WP4-10

The fact that such tactics and strategies can be successfully applied is a very straightforward indication of how strong are the deeply entrenched antagonisms and suspicions in the relations between the majority and minorities in Bulgaria. These embedded stereotypes have not been modified neither by the processes of democratisation and Europeanization, nor by the participation of Turks in the nation’s political and social life. The feelings of insecurity and tension obviously continue to run strong in the everyday life of the Turkish minority and they can be easily manipulated in a situation like the election period.

Three main discourses on the state of inter-ethnic relations in Bulgaria can be identified in the interviews:

- 1) inter-ethnic relations are not on a downward curve, but follow a cyclical pattern – deterioration in the election period after which they return to normality;
- 2) inter-ethnic relations are steadily deteriorating, not just because of the political games and manipulation, but because of the economic crisis and worsening standard of living
- 3) not only the inter-ethnic relations are worsening, but relations among all people in Bulgaria in general

1) Cyclical pattern:

Perceptions of people about the developments and experiences from their daily lives are often expressed in a very emotional tone. This strengthens the impression that the situation regarding the acceptance of otherness is worsening with an alarming pace. Some respondents disagree and say that there is no cause for alarm:

“The divisions and alienation are not increasing – they are just hardened and reproduced.” – A-WP4-1

“Changes happen, but only during the elections, afterwards they are gone. (What happened during the elections) is not typical for the relations among people who live there.” – A-WP4-9

“The bad thing is that they (the instigators) have started to come to our region. We never had them here before... Some Turks came to visit me, 70-80 years old, and they cry. They say – this can’t be happening, my boy, we are not all like that.” – A-WP4-8

The inter-ethnic tensions thus come to the fore in critical moments, but this is rather an exception than the rule. Even when such processes are in their most active phase, not all people yield to the manipulation.

2) Steady down-bound slide:

The events and debates that dominated the public space before and after the October 2011 elections clearly show that the official discourse on equality and acceptance remains only on surface. Beneath the politically correct plaster, antagonisms and non-acceptance remain the thin red line of inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations in Bulgaria. It seems that the prolonged participation of the MRF in the Bulgarian politics did not manage to bring the two communities closer, but exactly the opposite – the MRF is one of the main reasons for the deepening intolerant dispositions towards Turks among the majority population.

“When I started to work on the (Black Sea) coast, and people realized that I was a Turk... their attitude was a bit strange before they get to know what kind of person I am. They think that

Turks are not good people, but when we got to know each other, things changed. They told me afterwards that they have heard that Turks were bad....” – A-WP4-11

These unfavourable tendencies are strengthened also by the current economic crisis and the exacerbated situation in which many people live.

“Undoubtedly the negative attitudes and divisions are intensifying. The economic situation also contributes to this. I’m even afraid that at some moment, it can actually get much worse. In the situation of economic deficiency, the nationalistic passions can be easily provoked.” – A-WP4-4

This testifies that the tolerance in the Bulgarian society is at a rather low level – both in the majority population and among the minorities. Otherness is accepted only on the declarative level, which is by no means conducive to inter-ethnic trust. The reaction to the ambivalent (to say the least) attitude of the majority towards the minorities is the corresponding position of the minority communities. Burdened by the heritage of past repression and hardships, and facing prejudice and negative reactions in their daily lives, the minorities harbour no illusions about the tolerant attitude of the majority. These anxieties, hostilities and distrust are easily exploited by the political actors in an appropriate moment like elections.

3) Trust no one:

Some respondents who talk about the aggravated relations between people stress that this is not happening only among the ones belonging to different ethnic and religious communities, but also among the people from the same group.

“But after the last elections I see that the distrust has intensified. Now there is distrust even among our own people (Turks). Now you consider what you do and say even in front of your relatives, your cousins.” – A-WP4-11

On a more positive note, we can mention an example of a municipality populated by Muslim Bulgarians (who are the local majority), Christian Bulgarians, Roma and Turks. The mayor and the municipal council have made a deliberate effort over the years to work for equality of all religious and ethnic groups. As a result, the respondents from the municipality did not talk about antagonisms and inter-ethnic problems, and it seems that worrying developments noted in a large part of the country remain alien to this ethnically and religiously very diverse municipality. This shows that despite the enduring stereotypes, the ethno-religious divisions and conflicts are not something ingrained in Bulgaria, but are above all a tool employed by unscrupulous political actors to gain or preserve their hold on power.

Conclusion:

Our preliminary hypothesis that the new Election Code and especially the restrictions on voting rights of some Bulgarian citizens will provoke significant outrage was not confirmed during the fieldwork. Most surprising was the fact that (with the notable exceptions of the two MPs) even the respondents from the Turkish community (which was directly targeted by the restrictions in the Code) were not particularly affected by the issue and rather tried to rationalise or even defend this obvious infringement of civic rights. Other respondents, especially those belonging to the majority population, demonstrated a cautious approval of the restrictive measures. This can be interpreted as a sign that the society is generally not well disposed towards respect and recognition of others, but that the dominant tendency is to support political and legal measures of exclusion and intolerance.

4. Analysis of the political challenge: Voting rights of the Roma minority

4. 1. Background information

Roma are also a traditional minority in Bulgaria, but unlike Turks, they are neither consolidated, nor very active in the political and public life. The community is divided into numerous sub-groups, and the relations between them are most often less than cordial. The main differences between these subgroups are linguistic, cultural and religious. The most important problem of the Roma community is the extreme poverty, combined with the exceptionally low level of education and fast growing illiteracy rates. The main reasons for the alarmingly high dropout rates of Roma children are (beside poverty) lack of family support for education, the need to work at an very early age both at home and outside home, unfriendly environment Roma children are often exposed to in schools (which are often perceived as threatening and restraining institutions), and early marriages and early pregnancies (Tilkidzhiev et al, 2009, pp. 67-82).

Unlike Turks, who overwhelmingly vote for the MRF, the Roma community has never unified behind a single Roma party. Despite having the numerical potential to send such a party into the National Assembly, the Roma votes are usually highly fragmented (by 2005, there have been 26 registered Roma political parties in the country). Additionally, Roma voters display a low interest in the politics and usually fail to rally behind even the most ambitious and well-organised political campaigns of the Roma political parties. Only two Roma parties (Euro-Roma and Political Party Roma) have managed to win a seat or two in the National Assembly in different parliamentary terms. However, this has never happened when they participated on the elections on their own, but were awarded a seat as members of a coalition headed by a larger national party (Hajdinjak, 2008, pp. 119-121).

4. 2. Vote buying and Roma

Most of the elections that took place in Bulgaria over the past decade have been marred by the extensive vote buying and similar manipulations. The Roma community is considered particularly vulnerable to possible malpractices. Media and different observers have witnessed and in some cases documented a number of instances when brokers, “armed” with lists of names, addresses and personal identity numbers, were offering votes for sale in impoverished Roma neighbourhoods (Leviev-Sawyer, 2011). A survey conducted by the National Centre for the Study of Public Opinion showed that vote buying is considered the most widespread and troubling type of election violations (36.6%). Further 52.8% said that the main flaw of the existing election legislation is that it makes the vote buying possible (NCSPO, 2010).

Another NCSPO survey, conducted in 2009, showed that 40% of Roma are prepared to vote for those who pay them. In comparison, among all Bulgarian citizens regardless of ethnic origin, 12% are willing to sell their vote (Vesti, 2009). A more recent survey by Transparency International Bulgaria confirmed this number, showing that this is a persistent tendency – one in every ten Bulgarians openly admits that they would sell their vote despite the fact that this is a criminal offence punishable by law (Novinite.com, 2011).

Vote buying is an illegal practice used by representatives of various political actors to convince voters to vote for the given party in exchange for money or other material gift. Vote buying is most widespread in societies with low democratic culture and traditions, marked by significant distrust and disillusionment with the established political system. The most appropriate targets for vote-buyers are marginalized groups (minorities, rural population, uneducated and impoverished people). Vote buying works best if the voter turnout is low, as even a small number of purchased votes can secure the desired electoral result. The political actors in search of voters usually need to get in touch with “an unofficial community leader.” The Roma ghettos in Bulgarian cities usually have a very strict

hierarchical arrangement, with a few wealthy “businessmen” (often with criminal background) at the top of the pyramid. Once such leader is located, the negotiations start. The leader explains how many votes can be secured and names the price (anything from 10 to 100 EUR per vote plus the personal fee of few thousand EUR). The leader makes sure that his “subordinates” vote properly by placing trusted “observers” in the local electoral commission, although control is usually unnecessary as the people selling their votes are neither interested in the politics nor actually aware who they vote for (for a very good and detailed article describing how undercover journalists posing as members of a non-existing political party successfully purchased votes in a Roma-populated Stolipinovo Quarter in the city of Plovdiv, see Dikov, 2009).

The reasons why the willingness to participate in the vote buying is much more common among the Roma community are complex, but are overall connected to their exceptionally low social-economic status and deep marginalisation. The political parties from left, right and centre usually remember the Roma community only during the pre-election periods and Roma are aware that these are not just the only opportunities to have access to political figures or their representatives, but also the only chance to get some practical benefits (like financial or other gifts) from the politicians. In turn, despite their countless declarations to the contrary, most political parties through their behaviour and actions on every election seem to support the established model of attracting the Roma voters only through offering them (legal or illegal) gifts and similar incentives. Almost no political party has tried to win the Roma votes through concrete political platforms for improvement of the Roma situation, inclusion of Roma candidates on the electable positions on candidate lists, or including Roma on important positions in central or local governments. Since 1989, each parliamentary assembly included only one Roma MP, with the exception of 2001-2005 period, when there were two Roma in the Parliament.

In the prelude to the 2011 local elections, various steps were taken to prevent or limit the practice of vote buying. Some were directly aimed at Roma voters and although they do not violate the legislation, their legitimacy can be seriously questioned. It is also very obvious that such measures have a discriminatory character and are an infringement of the rights of the Roma citizens.

In the Kyustendil municipality, the mayor Peter Paunov refused to set up voting sections inside the Roma neighbourhood. On the previous elections, usually 6 sections accommodating about 5500 Roma voters operated in the neighbourhood. Under the pretext that such a measure would remove the preconditions for the controlled vote, pressure and vote buying, Roma voters were “transferred” to the voters’ lists at voting sections in other parts of the town, causing considerable inconvenience to some and discouraging others from participation on the elections. According to mayor Paunov, his model should be applied on the national level on the next elections (Obretenov, 2011). According to the legislation, voting sections are established by the municipality mayors within the territory of the municipality not later than 55 days in advance of the election day (Article 71 (2) of the Election Code). According to an expert working for the regional administration, such arrangement can only intensify the negative predispositions towards Roma. The political actors, who are actually responsible for the vote buying are not sanctioned in any way, while the Roma are punished by having their voting rights restricted (Hristov, 2011)

4. 3. The media analysis

The media carry a large share of responsibility for the prevailingly negative attitude towards Roma. According to a research of the Institute of Modern Politics, which studied publications in five Bulgarian daily newspapers in the five months period, from 743 articles on Roma issues, only 15 displayed a positive attitude towards Roma. The issue of vote buying and its link to the Roma was included in 4% of these articles (Panev, 2012).

The daily *Trud* published 31 articles on vote buying in October-November 2011 (roughly a month before and after the 2011 presidential and local elections). More than half of the articles (19) were

about concrete cases of vote buying (in numerous articles, more than one case was described). The articles gave the initials and in some cases full names of people who were arrested for involvement in vote buying. In numerous cases, the arrested individuals were promptly put on trial and sentenced. Eight articles analysed the problems and irregularities that occurred during the elections, including vote buying. Several of these articles explained in detail how the vote buying schemes operate. Four articles presented views and reactions of relevant political actors.

Roma were mentioned in 9 articles – most often as people selling their votes. In three articles, Roma criminal bosses or Roma “informal leaders” (usually a local loan shark) were described as people the corrupt political actors turned to in order to purchase Roma votes. It is interesting to note that most articles used language close to ironic to describe the cases of Roma vote trade. Rather than presenting the phenomenon as a harmful social pathology, articles took delight in absurdity of most cases.⁸ One article even went as far as to propose that the vote trade should be legalised, as it became more than obvious that it cannot be prevented.

Ironic side of the articles aside, the newspaper reporting on vote buying confirmed that this practice is still exceptionally widespread and damaging. A very concerning tendency is that newly established political parties readily accept vote buying and other election irregularities as a normal part of the political game. Furthermore, it seems that in their aspiration to compete with or defeat the established political parties, the new political actors exploit the illegal and illegitimate way to secure votes even more arrogantly and without any constraints. In this way, this malicious practice will continue to spread in the coming years. Painfully aware of the situation, the majority of the Bulgarian voters are becoming increasingly disillusioned and disappointed over the state of the Bulgarian political system and prefer not to vote at all, which is playing straight into the hands of the corrupt and dishonest economic-political actors. The lesser the turnout on the election day, less votes have to be bought to turn the elections in the desired direction.

4. 4. Fieldwork analysis – views of the respondents

4. 4. 1. Dispositions towards Roma and their political participation

All ethnic communities in Bulgaria have substantial and persistent prejudice against Roma. The main negative stereotypes are that they are criminals, do not respect laws and social norms, do not want to work and improve their situation, and that they cannot be integrated into the society. Two of our respondents, who have been involved in the political campaigning on the national level said that the most immense challenge they encountered in their conversations with voters across the country was to overcome the exceptional negativism and prejudice against Roma (A-WP4-2, A-WP4-3).

The majority population is troubled by the growing fear fuelled by the media that the number of Roma was steadily rising, as were their illiteracy, marginalisation and ghettoisation. A respondent pointed out that these fears are a logical consequence of extremely one-sided public image of the Roma community, which is a consequence of unbalanced and sensationalistic media reporting.

“Our society lacks a positive image of an integrated Roma person. And there are numerous interesting and telling examples the society just does not know about. What dominates the media is a negative image – a villain of Roma origin. And there are many Roma who have achieved something with honest work and with their abilities.” – A-WP4-1

⁸ For example, a 75 year old man was arrested by the police for giving 10 EUR to each person in his village who promised to vote for the designated candidate for the mayor. The aged vote buyer was sentenced to 150 hours of publically-beneficial labour (cleaning of the streets). In another case, a person was fined with 250 EUR for bribing two people to vote for his father by providing them free firewood for the coming winter.

One of our respondents is a well educated Roma man from a small village. He was invited to become a member of the ruling GERB party and actively participated in the pre-election campaign in the region. His personal expectation was that the party would nominate him as a candidate for the municipal council, only to learn with deep bitterness that despite the promises, he was not included in the candidate list (A-WP4-7).

This is a very telling illustration of the problem of the Roma political participation. Most political parties are reluctant to raise Roma candidates for the National Assembly or for the municipal councils. Instead, they prefer to secure the Roma votes through informal channels. The political actors usually offer stereotypical excuses that no Roma candidates have the needed education and experience. However, the practice shows that even when such people are available, they are neglected and rejected.

Respondents are very critical about all political parties and believe that none of them is truly interested in the fate of the minorities. They suspect that most parties simply want to manipulate and exploit minority groups for their own different purposes. Those respondents, who are politically and socially active, leave little room for doubt in their opinions:

“There is no political force with such a programme. Even if they have something written down on paper, they have no intention of respecting it. Because of the way the entire political situation is constructed in Bulgaria, each political force has a certain interest to manipulate and use minorities.” – A-WP4-4

“In my opinion there is no political party with a clear programme for integration of minorities.” – A-WP4-1

The comments about the political representation of Roma are similar.

“I believe that minorities should have their own representatives on all levels (local, regional and central) of government and in all political parties. In municipalities, in the national parliament, in all institutions. Now we still see that certain state institutions are closed for the minorities.” – A-WP4-3

Despite the predominant liberal and tolerant general opinion that minorities should be politically represented in all branches of state power, respondents are very sceptical that this can realistically be achieved. Allowing for the possibility that in near future such development indeed takes place, many respondents wonder how effective would such political participation be. What lies at the bottom of such scepticism are again the entrenched stereotypes and suspicions that people of minority origin (Roma in particular) with necessary qualities and integrity are in a short supply.

“Quotas, the actual opening of political space for such people, will not automatically lead to improvement of the situation of the minorities.” – A-WP4-4

“Minorities in the government of the state... if we speak about Roma, I think they are not represented enough. But, if we let more Roma... well it depends on them. Depends on the individual person – what they want to achieve and why.” – A-WP4-5

The issue about the political representation of Roma is thus considered as a problem, but not a very significant one, judging from the very limited and general opinions respondents have shared when asked to comment on it. They see it as one of the potential steps for the improvement of the situation of Roma, but have no clear opinion about the concrete steps that need to be taken.

Additional factor complicating the discussion about Roma and the voting process is the general distrust in the state institutions and the political class. Bulgarians are remarkably critical in their evaluation of the legitimacy of the state institutions and do not trust the government, the Parliament, the political parties and the judiciary (see European Commission, 2009, p. 20). For this reason, the topics like election frauds and voting manipulation are discussed with noticeable resignation. If

anything has surprised them, than it was the sheer scale and unscrupulousness of irregularities on October 2011 elections. Most politicians (with a notable exception of the winning GERB party), media and society have united behind an opinion that the recent elections were the most flawed elections in the recent Bulgarian history. The signals and complaints about foul election play were countless. The results of the public opinion poll show that only a quarter of the population believes that the elections were conducted fairly and democratically.

Which opinion about the October elections is closer to your opinion? In %

Opinion	All	Bulgarians	Turks	Roma	Pomaks
Elections were fair and democratic	24	25	20	26	8
Elections were not fair and democratic	36	36	34	27	52
I cannot say	34	32	42	40	28
Refused to answer	7	7	3	8	12

Source: Institute “Ivan Hadjiyski,” Gallup International. December 2011. National inquiry, 1009 respondents aged over 18.

4. 4. 2. Vote buying and Roma

In the context of our research, we have focused most of the questions related to dispositions towards Roma on the issue of vote buying. In the media and in the public perceptions, vote buying is most often attributed to Roma, who are therefore accused that they influence the election results in an illegal and illegitimate way. According to most of our respondents, however, this practice is not limited to Roma anymore, if it ever was.

“The practice of vote buying is spreading not just among Roma, but among everyone. The people with suitcases (with money) are everywhere.” – A-WP4-8

“There was vote buying – not just among the minorities and especially Roma. This time there was vote buying among Turks, Roma, Bulgarians. Unfortunately, everyone has sold their vote.” – A-WP4-2

One respondent tried to explain why so many Roma participate in the vote buying schemes, noting that the extreme poverty and difficult circumstances in which they live leave them little choice.

“Nobody pays any attention to them, only for a moment, when they want their vote to win the elections. After that it is again as if they don’t exist. So they will always sell their vote. For a meal, for beer, for 20 leva, 50 leva... They will give their vote because they live day for a day. There is also a lot of pressure on them.” – A-WP4-11

Interesting observation from the interviews is that most respondents are to such an extent used to the widespread practice of vote buying that they do not find the topic overly interesting and their answers are not particularly insightful. Most respondents preferred to give general opinions about the problems related with Roma marginalisation and the dispositions of the majority population towards Roma.

“We, the majority, are responsible for what Roma are doing. We spoiled them. We didn’t teach them to share our responsibilities and obligations, even towards their own children. It is true that the national psychology also plays a role, but we have helped them to abuse the state.” – A-WP4-9

“They can integrate, but only if we also change our way of thinking.” – A-WP4-10

As already mentioned, most respondents tried to explain the Roma situation by defining the main problems – low level of education and bad economic situation.

“In my opinion, education is the key problem. Only education can bring the next generations of Roma into a position, where they could fully integrate into the society. The social inequality

is also a fundamental problem. The differences in the standard of living between the majority and the main ethnic minorities are shocking.” – A-WP4-1

“The real interest of these minorities is to have an equal access to education and prosperity – just like all other citizens. The political parties which claim to protect their interests are actually doing everything to keep them not educated, illiterate and without livelihood. In this way, the minorities are dependent on these political parties.” – A-WP4-4

Such opinions are quite typical for the Bulgarian society. Roma are stigmatised as poor and illiterate. While most people consider that this is a significant problem, few have any clear ideas about how this could be changed. The public debate and the attitudes towards Roma are concentrated on the issue of their integration. This discourse is dominated by an explicitly patronising tone, where Roma are not considered as an equal community with an unalienable right to manage its own affairs, but as a social problem the Bulgarian society has to “take care of.” In this sense, even the declarative tolerant attitude towards Roma is in fact a very intolerant one in its essence. Blaming the Roma and the alleged widespread Roma vote selling for all the deformities and faults of the Bulgarian political system is just another manifestation of this intolerance.

5. Conclusion

The research into the issue of minority voting rights and their political representation has shown that this is among the most contentious problems in the relations between the majority and the minorities. The election periods are highly volatile occasions when confrontations and antagonisms based on ethnic, religious and cultural differences are mobilised and brought to the fore by different political formations that expect to profit from such developments. The fact that similar tactics usually pay off shows that despite the seemingly calm and idyllic ethno-religious relations in Bulgaria between the election turmoils, the potential for inter-ethnic strife and tension in the country is not negligible. As long as the threats and even the fabricated accusations and examples can mobilize the ethno-religious factor to win the elections, we cannot speak about the real tolerance and acceptance of different communities in Bulgaria.

The current research has again highlighted the significant discrepancy between the official political and public discourse on perception and application of democratic norms and values, which are characteristic for the majority of EU countries, and the real situation in the country. While the public speech is focused on notions of tolerance and acceptance, the concrete examples and everyday practices testify about entrenched intolerance that can be easily mobilised in the critical moments like political, social and economic crisis.

Despite the fact that the central government periodically comes up with different programmes and strategies for integration of minorities, the practical implementation is either lacking or is flawed and inadequate. The research has shown that the regional solutions tailored to the ethnic, cultural and religious structure of the population on the local level can be far more successful than the solutions proposed on the national level. Numerous small towns and villages with ethnically and religiously diverse population provide good examples and practices of balanced and stable cohabitation. The largest problem is to find a way to transfer the functioning everyday tolerance from the local level into the national context, which continues to be dominated by intolerant stereotypes and prejudices. As a result, despite the long history of diverse ethnic and religious structure of the Bulgarian state, the traditional mechanisms of coexistence did not lead to acceptance of otherness, but merely to parallel coexistence.

Our recommendation to the policy-makers is to employ the potential existing on the local level and institutionalise it. The local authorities ought to be given a very active role in this process. At the moment, the central government is exercising a much too strong and tight control over the local governments. A larger regional and municipal autonomy to address the needs and problems of the local population according to its specific features would be a positive step in turning the unsuccessful top-down approach into a more appropriate two-way process. Like in numerous other spheres in Bulgaria, this process would benefit tremendously if monitored (and financially supported) by the European Commission.

The research has also established that many people are either ignorant of or tend to disregard the numerous problems that could provoke or intensify tensions between different ethnic, cultural and religious groups. Forming and changing the collective matrix is a long and contradictory process. The humanities and especially interdisciplinary studies can play a very valuable role here. Our recommendation is therefore to intensify the research of inter-ethnic relations – not just in Bulgarian context, but also in the European one. The disclosure of good practices and popularisation of results from similar studies increase the sensitivity of the society for such topics. They also stimulate the willingness of the state institutions to look for and implement more adequate and comprehensive policies.

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Annex 1: The Interview Guide

1. Do you know about the new Election Code? What do you think about it – especially about the changes restricting the voting rights of people with dual citizenship and the residence principle – namely the obligation to permanently reside in a given municipality six months prior to the election day?
2. What was the influence of the new Code on the recent elections? Do you think that the elections were conducted correctly, especially regarding the participation of minorities?
3. Did you vote on these elections?
4. Were the ethnic and religious minorities represented well enough in the election programme of the party you voted for? Is this an important issue for you?
5. Does the political party you sympathise with have a programme for integration of minorities? How do you see the relations between different ethnic and religious groups in the political life in Bulgaria?
6. What would be your recommendations for improvement of policies towards minorities, and for improving their political representation (especially of the Roma)? Would you support the idea of including Roma, Turks, Pomaks on the candidate lists for municipal councils and mayors on the positions where they could realistically be elected?
7. Do you believe that if more Roma were represented in the municipal councils, or if more Roma were mayors, this would help their integration into the society and would improve the inter-ethnic cohabitation in your village / town / municipality?
8. What is your opinion about the vote buying? Have you witnessed such cases? Did anyone try to manipulate your vote?
9. What do you think about cases like Kyustendil municipality, where the mayor prohibited voting sections in the Roma neighbourhood with the explanation that this would limit the vote buying and the controlled voting? Is this the practice that should be used?
10. Have you witnessed any other irregularities in the voting section where you voted?
11. Should the people with dual citizenship who live abroad have the same voting rights as those who live permanently in Bulgaria? Are you familiar with arrangements in other countries? If this right is restricted – would this constitute a violation of the Constitution? Or international laws?
12. How would you evaluate the current relations between different ethnic and religious communities in your municipality, town and in the country? Do you feel that the negative tendencies like division and alienation are increasing? Why?

Annex 2: profile of the respondents

Code	Place of residence	Origin	M/F	Position	Remarks
A-WP4-1	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Professor in sociology, well-known political analyst, left-wing	The respondent preferred to answer to the questionnaire in a written form
A-WP4-2	Sofia	Turkish	M	MP since 1997	One of the most influential figures in the MRF, expelled from the party in 2011
A-WP4-3	Sofia	Turkish	M	MP since 2009	Leader of the Youth Section of MRF, expelled from the party in 2011
A-WP4-4	Sofia	Bulgarian	M	Lawyer	
A-WP4-5	Central Bulgaria, village with predominately Roma population	Bulgarian	M	Former village mayor	Mayor for 4 years, ran a campaign in the 2011 local election, was not successful
A-WP4-6	Central Bulgaria, village with predominately Roma population	Bulgarian	F	Director of a kindergarten	Member of the Municipal Council from GERB
A-WP4-7	Central Bulgaria, village with predominately Roma population	Roma	M	Owner of a small coffee shop	Member of GERB, engaged in the election campaign, expected to be nominated for Municipal Council but was not
A-WP4-8	Eastern Bulgaria, town with predominately Turkish population	Bulgarian	M	Former village mayor (3 terms)	Not a member of a political party, ran for a mayor in 2011 elections and lost
A-WP4-9	Eastern Bulgaria, town with predominately Turkish population	Bulgarian	F	Teacher in secondary school	
A-WP4-10	Eastern Bulgaria, town with predominately Turkish population	Turkish	F	Administrative secretary of a village mayor	Worked with the previous mayor and still holds the position
A-WP4-11	Eastern Bulgaria, village with predominately Turkish population	Turkish	M	Construction worker	
A-WP4-12	Southern Bulgaria, village with predominately Muslim Bulgarian population	Bulgarian Muslim	M	Municipality mayor (4 terms)	Twice elected with the support of MRF, twice elected as independent candidate; Won the elections in 2011
A-WP4-13	Southern Bulgaria, village with predominately Muslim Bulgarian population	Bulgarian Muslim	M	Rentier, Former mine worker	
A-WP4-14	Southern Bulgaria, village with predominately Muslim Bulgarian population	Bulgarian	M	Former mine worker	